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## **Affirmation, Validation, and Empowerment: Influences of a Composition Competition on Students' Self-Concepts as Musicians**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine if participation in a composition competition influenced four K-12 students' self-concepts as musicians. Research questions explored motivations for these four students to enter into a composition competition, influences of the competition on students' self-concepts as musicians (if at all), and effects of the competition besides those of self-concept as a musician (if at all). Data sources for this multiple case design study included semi-structured interviews, journals, and wiki interactions. Findings determined that acceptance to the competition, performance of students' works, and the reception that students received validated and strengthened their self-concepts as musicians. Suggestions for teaching practice include providing constructive feedback from competition adjudicators, creating face-to-face and online experiences for student composers to network, and offering non-adjudicated composition festival experiences for students.

### **Keywords**

Adjudication, competition, composition, musician, motivation, self-concept

### **Article**

Competitive events in music education have been the subject of discussion and research in the United States since the first national contest for concert band in 1922 (Rohrer, 2002). Although researchers have studied competition in relation to traditional large ensemble and solo and small-ensemble contests (Austin, 1988, 1991; Bergee, 2006;

Forbes, 1994; Sheldon, 1994), they have not directly examined competitions that evaluate compositions. These events feature a committee of adjudicators that evaluates compositions on criteria such as originality, playability, overall musical appeal, and use of compositional techniques. Researchers have suggested that participation in music performance competitions may influence K-12 students' self-concepts (Austin, 1988; Schmidt, 2005; Wood, 1973), defined for the purposes of this study as "a person's personal perception of his or her level of ability or acceptance in any given area" (Randles, 2010, p. 9). Therefore, music education researchers should study the possible influences of participation in composition competitions on the self-concept of K-12 student composers as musicians, as an examination of this phenomenon could assist educators with determining if participation in composition competitions is beneficial and educationally appropriate for this population.

### **Review of Selected Literature**

Motivation and self-determination theory are key psychological constructs in the concept of competition (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Intrinsic motivators, those that inspire one to act based on an internal interest for the activity, are regarded as being more conducive to learning, as opposed to extrinsic motivators (external rewards), which may stifle internally interesting activities (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hickey, 1997). Intrinsically motivated students are more likely to seek out and master challenges (Deci & Porac, 1978). Furthermore, positive feedback regarding competence and efficacy can support intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Conversely, external rewards given to engage in an activity and threats/deadlines to complete an activity may curtail intrinsic motivation, as students are more compelled by

the reward or deadline than interest in the activity (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1987; Hickey, 1997). In addition to intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, students' self-concepts may have a major impact on their motivation (Austin, Renwick, & McPherson, 2006); those with positive self-concepts are more likely to engage in educational tasks, utilize skills they possess, persist in the face of difficulties, and achieve success (Burland & Davidson, 2002; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Song & Hattie, 1984).

Researchers have sought to determine if a relationship exists between music competitions and self-concept. Wood (1973) found a positive correlation between self-concept scores and solo and ensemble competition ratings. He also, however, found a negative correlation between achievement motivation scores (need to achieve success versus need to avoid failure) and ensemble contest ratings: those with a strong need to achieve performed worse in the contests than did students with low achievement motivation. Austin (1988) examined the effect of two competition adjudication formats (rated and written comments only) on the music achievement, self-concept, and achievement motivation scores of fifth- and sixth-grade band students using a survey that measured their attributional beliefs for success and failure as well as their level of intrinsic motivation. Results indicated that there was no difference in motivation scores between rated students and those who received only comments. Furthermore, students in both groups reported an improved self-concept. Austin suggested that the improvement of students' self-concepts could be attributed to students reacting positively to the novelty of having experienced a music competition for the first time. Schmidt (2005) sought to determine the extent to which motivation orientations and self-concept in instrumental

music are correlated using measures that included solo and ensemble competition data. Results showed a significant but low correlation, suggesting that students may respond best to intrinsic or cooperative aspects of instrumental music rather than extrinsic or competitive aspects.

Influences of composition competitions have been briefly alluded to in music education research literature (Carter, 2008) and on the Internet (Whitacre, 2009). Carter (2008), in a cross-case analysis, examined four undergraduate students' compositional identities and noted the role of composition competitions in shaping their identity development.

Winning competitions was highly influential for the students, providing motivation for them to continue writing and validating the quality of their works. Whitacre, a composer known for his choral, orchestral, and wind band works, wrote a blog post encouraging emerging composers to participate in composition competitions, opining that a submission deadline could motivate a composer to create and finish a work. Other reasons for participation include increased exposure to conductors, arts administrators, and publishers, and fueling a passion to continue composing (Whitacre, 2009).

The extant literature suggests that competition in music possibly, but not conclusively, influences self-concept (Austin, 1988; Schmidt, 2005; Wood, 1973). However, no researchers have specifically examined the relationship between self-concept and composition competitions. Examining the motivations of K-12 student composers to participate in composition competitions and their influence on K-12 students' self-concepts as musicians may assist educators with determining if such events support their emerging musician self-concept, foster creativity, and encourage future participation within a method of music learning that is employed at various levels in classrooms

internationally (Hargreaves & North, 2001; Odena, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine if participation in a composition competition influenced four K-12 students' self-concepts as musicians. Research questions were as follows:

1. What were the motivations for these four students to enter into a composition competition?
2. How has participation in a composition competition influenced each student's self-concept as a musician, if at all?
3. What influences has participation in a competition had on each student besides those of self-concept as a musician, if any?

## **Method**

### **Methodological Framework**

I employed a multiple case design as I sought to gather rich data from multiple data sources that would offer insight regarding the phenomenon being examined for this study (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, the multiple cases in this study and greater variation in cases offer the potential for a more compelling interpretation (Merriam, 1998).

### **The Composition Competition**

The 2014 K-12 composition competition from which I purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) participants for this study was sponsored by a music education association in the Midwestern region of the United States. Compositions from K-12 students were due to the competition coordinators by November 1, 2013, after which composition students from a state university served as adjudicators. These adjudicators used a rubric with specified criteria to determine which compositions would be accepted for performance. Students did not receive written or oral feedback regarding their compositions. The sole

award for accepted students was the opportunity to have their compositions performed during a concert at the state music education association's annual conference. I attended the concert to listen to the wide variety of compositions, including string ensembles, concert band, solo voice, and solo piano. Performers included the composers themselves, their peers, and multi-generational community ensembles.

I adhered to the American Psychological Association's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (American Psychological Association, 2010) throughout this study. After receiving approval from my university's Human Research Protection Programs Social Science Institutional Review Board (IRB), I emailed all students whose works were accepted for performance at the competition ( $n = 21$ ), as well as students whose works were not accepted to the competition ( $n = 11$ ), via email addresses listed on students' competition applications. I also emailed consent forms (for parents/legal guardians or students 18 years of age and older) and assent forms (for students below 18 years of age) reviewed and approved by the university's IRB that outlined the purpose of the study and rights of the participant. I explicitly stated that no student would be allowed to participate until I received the completed form(s) and that students had to right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Seven participants, one in middle school (typically encompasses the 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> years of pre-collegiate education in the US) and six in high school (typically the last four years of pre-collegiate education in the US), all of whom had works accepted to the competition, replied and were asked to respond to the prompt, "Why do you enjoy composing?" to assess their depth of thought on the subject matter and quality of age-appropriate writing. Six returned the writing prompt, all of whom were in high school. I then employed

purposeful sampling techniques (Patton, 2002) to select four students to participate in all phases of the study. I sought to create a sample with a variety of ages and major instruments/voices. I also sought representation from multiple geographical areas and a range of experience with composition competitions. The participant selection process also included analysis of writing prompts. I considered clarity of writing to be important for this study due to the methods of data collection that were to be employed. I used pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

### **Data Sources, Procedure, and Analysis**

Data sources included one 60-minute semi-structured interview (Patton, 2002) per participant, journals, and wiki interactions. Furthermore, I attempted to interview participants' school music teachers in an attempt to enrich the study's data set and further illuminate the phenomenon of interest. Two school music teachers were unable to be interviewed for this study. Additionally, the other two school music teachers interviewed did not provide data that was particularly illuminating for the research questions.

Therefore, I did not include data from the interviewed school music teachers in my analysis.

Participants kept a journal to assist with reflection and were asked to include thoughts regarding composing when they emerged. According to Lebler (2008), journaling has emerged as one of the most common forms of structured reflection and "assists with the creation of ideas and patterns of order out of the mainly random events of experience" (p. 194).

Additionally, all students interacted with each other via a wiki, an Internet application that supports text collaboration and knowledge building (Baltzersen, 2010). I posed one



question weekly for four weeks. All questions were based on the three research questions of the present study and also were informed by data generated during the interviews.

Students were asked to type their answers into the wiki and respond to at least one other student's response. The wiki helped to generate additional data by having students interact with each other using their pseudonyms to discuss the phenomena of interest.

I contacted all accepted and declined composition competition students via email immediately after I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval in February 2014.

Participant interviews took place between February and March 2014 and included formal, prepared questions that assisted me in understanding the phenomena of interest. The wiki interactions were another means of obtaining data in a social context and took place

between March and April 2014. I transcribed all interviews immediately following each and collected students' journal entries weekly. Data analysis took place in May and June.

Following multiple readings of interview transcripts, journal entries, and wiki interactions, I used Descriptive Coding procedures (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to create an inventory of codes. I then employed Focused Coding (Charmaz, 2006) to develop themes. I also kept a separate codebook with emerging codes and wrote analytic memos to assist with reflection (Saldaña, 2013). Additionally, I used substantive significance (Patton, 2002) to determine what in the data was meaningful.

### **Trustworthiness and Limitations**

Trustworthiness was enhanced through data collection triangulation (Merriam, 1998). In addition, each participant also member-checked his/her transcripts for accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants did not make any changes to the transcripts. Finally, I subjected my initial codes and data sources to a peer audit process with music education

colleagues who are qualitative researchers and familiar with this topic to strengthen my analysis and reporting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Although the findings of this study are not generalizable to all contexts, the reader may use “logical situational generalizability” (Schwartz, 1996, p. 7) to transfer findings to other populations: if the reader can logically assume that participants in another population are in a situation similar to the one described in the study, it may be possible that results from this study are relevant in other contexts.

The next sections contain biographical and contextual information regarding the four participants who participated in all phases of the study, findings that emerged from the data, and discussion of the findings.

### **Study Participants**

*Chris* was 15 years of age at the time of data collection and had previously participated in two composition competitions sponsored by the same music education organization. A second-year student in high school, he had played string bass since sixth grade and was in his high school string orchestra. His work performed at the composition competition was for middle school string ensemble. *Chris* attended a public suburban high school and lived in a town in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile for per capita income in the state. *Chris* became interested in composing after his sister undertook a composition project in her middle school ensemble. He was also interested in how composers created works that he played in his middle school ensemble. After downloading Sibelius, a music notation software program, *Chris* listened to recordings and studied scores of middle school string works that were comparable to what he would have performed, teaching himself how to compose similar works:

It was more of a basic, the composer has an intro here, the melody starts here, the violas take over the melody here, and then it repeats and ends . . . It wasn't like, D G A B minor, that sort of thing. But then later on it moved to that. If I heard a song, studying a piece that I liked, I tried to be imitative of that style, use the rhythms that he used, the direction his phrase went, so, I might just take a note out of there and hum to myself and try to make a melody, or go to the piano and try to figure something out. I usually don't write my melodies until after I write my intros, so I don't usually have an idea and try to build around that. I try to build a background for the piece and then get the melody in. (interview, February 23, 2014)

At the time of this study, Chris had three middle school string orchestra works published by a sheet music publisher specializing in repertoire for school music ensembles.

However, it is important to note that none of the participants in this study had ever worked with a composition teacher. Chris relies on his school music teacher, who is knowledgeable in what is musically and technically appropriate for middle and high school string ensembles, for feedback:

My director will look over my pieces now and then to say, "I think this works well for middle school," look over the pieces before I submit them to publishers, because he's the guy who buys them. I have him look them over. He may proofread them and edit them, but he doesn't teach me how to compose.

(interview, February 23, 2014)

*Diane* was 18 years of age at the time of data collection and had composed and performed many raps throughout her city and at her school, as well as self-produced

several CDs of her raps for family and friends. Her work performed at the composition competition was a rap inspired by the loss of a close family member and role model.

Diane had never been a member of any school music ensemble throughout her four years in high school. This was her first composition competition. Diane attended a public urban high school and lived in a city in the 15<sup>th</sup> percentile for per capita income in the state.

Although she aspired to become the best female rapper, she also considered herself a lyricist and composer:

I guess they are similar in a way . . . because, a composer is, to me, someone who actually constructs the music, writes it, the music, the art, whatever you're writing.

A lyricist is someone who actually puts thought into their music, naturally intertwine their deep emotions with their lyrics. It just comes to my head. If I'm feeling a certain type of way one day, like if I have a real strong emotion, and I put the pen to the paper and just write, it just comes out. I have always struggled with anger management problems and stuff like that. So, that's how I started.

That's how I learned to get rid of all of that. By writing. Whatever emotion I'm feeling is what displays when I put the pen to the paper. I'm both lyricist and composer because I write poetry, not just rap. I write songs, like, singing songs, I write short stories. I'm a composer. (interview, March 5, 2014)

Music and stories were present throughout Diane's childhood. Diane's mother read Stephen King and S. E. Hinton novels, as well as poetry, to Diane when she was young. Both of Diane's parents used to rap and played recordings by Run-D.M.C. and Tupac around the house. Diane cited this "old school music" as having more of an influence on her composing style than contemporary artists:

I listened to a lot of old school music because I like it better than the music now. You hear more things that sway like, emotionally, and I guess you could say, persuading you to, like, follow dreams and stuff. [*long pause*] Yeah, I just listened to a lot of old schools. I grew up on a lot of Tupac, Run-D.M.C., stuff like that. Now, [I listen to the] same thing. They talk about real life issues. Stuff, rather than just talking about a chain or a car. Stuff that don't matter. Things that aren't relevant. They [Tupac and Run-D.M.C.] gave you stuff to think about. I like music that makes you think. I really don't listen to music nowadays. (interview, March 5, 2014)

*May* was 15 years of age at the time of data collection and had composed works for voice, piano, and guitar. A first-year student in high school, she was a soprano in her school's choir and also played saxophone, piano, flute, ukulele, and drum set both in and outside of school. Her work performed at the composition competition was for piano and voice and was written with the intent of conveying independence and empowerment. This was her first composition competition. *May* attended a public suburban high school and lived in a city in the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile for per capita income in the state. She first started with composing by "noodling around," which she enjoyed and found musically fulfilling:

When I was in second grade, I started writing random songs, and I still remember one of the choruses . . . it's really funny. They were not very good, though. I didn't write for a long time until I was in 7th grade. We just finished up the school play and we snuck back into our school's media center. It was all unlocked. The staff didn't know that we were in there until one of the custodial staff said, "Yeah, you guys can stay in here." There was a piano back on the stage and we kind of

started noodling around. And it worked out really well. It was just a spark: “Hey! This song sounds cool. I should try this again.” I kept writing and kept writing. I like composing because, just through things that I’ve been through, I can kind of figure out how to put those into words, because that’s hard to do. When you have something that’s heart wrenching to say out loud, it’s a lot easier to put into a melody. (interview, March 6, 2014)

May chooses to write about empowerment, acceptance, and overcoming hardship, choosing a positive outlook over the negativity that she perceives in pop culture and music:

Most pop songs are about pain. You can’t just write all about the hardship in your life, but that’s where a lot of songs come from. What I choose to do is, instead of having a really, really sad song, I choose to make it about getting over that sadness . . . how something happens and you’re like, “I’m going to get through this.” I try to make it more about empowerment than “I’m a very sad person right now.” I’ve written a few sad songs. But, one of my main things is empowerment, about how I don’t really care what you think of me. I’m going to be myself and if you don’t like that, then it’s okay. (interview, March 6, 2014)

*Alice* was 17 years of age at the time of data collection and had composed works for piano and voice. She was an alto in her school’s choir and a third-year student in high school. Although this is her first composition competition, she had participated in piano performance competitions from age 7 through age 16. Her work performed at the composition competition was for piano and voice and musically conveyed her future as a musician. *Alice* attended a public suburban high school and lived in a town in the 50<sup>th</sup>

percentile for per capita income in the state. Alice played video games at a young age and found the music soundtracks for video games composed by Yoko Shimomura to be quite compelling—enough that she wanted to imitate what she was listening to:

When I was a kid, I had my top ten favorite video game composers list. Yoko Shimomura is my favorite. She composed for *Kingdom Hearts*. She might have been the first composer that I *really* listened to. I remember listening to her piece and being like, “I want to compose like her!” I sat down at the piano and listened. I think that also helped me to learn the information and theory behind composing: “There’s the first section, the second section, the build-up,” and all that, just from wanting to compose like certain composers. I got that vibe just from immersion and learned a lot just from that. (interview, February 28, 2014)

Similar to Chris, Alice studied scores, transcriptions, and recordings to learn how to compose and transcribed melodies by ear to better understand how to construct them:

At first, it was very hard because I didn’t really understand the certain patterns that were kind of established before you begin. I would look at the sheet music of other people and pieces to figure out, “Oh, they did this. That means I can do this.” I think it was a lot of looking at others to help me figure it out for myself . . . that and figuring things out by ear. (interview, February 28, 2014)

At the time of the study, she aspired to write music for video games and planned to study composing via technology at a university.

## **Findings**

### **Reasons for Entering a Composition Competition**

All four students had been composing music for several years prior to entering the present competition process. They enjoyed composing for various reasons, including the expression of their thoughts and ideas to others (May, Alice, Chris, Diane), release of emotions (Diane and Alice), and “reaching out to others” (Diane). However, two broad themes for entering the competition emerged between the four students: validation (May and Diane) and exposure (Chris, Diane, and Alice).

**Validation: May and Diane.** May and Diane submitted their compositions to the competition so an anonymous third party could objectively evaluate them. Both students believed that acceptance to the competition would confirm that their works were of sufficient quality, thus validating their efforts and skills as composers. After a brief period of composing when she was young, May started composing in seventh grade and become more interested in expressing herself through music. She, however, had never received any feedback on her works from a composer or music teacher. May sought feedback from a venerable source on what to improve for her adjudicated composition, believing that this feedback could be applied towards future compositions:

I wrote a song and then I thought, “There’s a composer’s concert that I could send this into.” I knew that my brother had done it before and I kind of wanted professional feedback. I wanted somebody who *knew* music better than my friends did . . . or someone who has a degree in music to say if this is good or not. Like I said, I didn’t get feedback from any composition or music teachers. I just thought, “This is one of my best songs, so I’m just going to send this in and register.” I’ve written songs before, but this is one of my best. So, I guess it had to not be awful to win the concert, or win the competition. I didn’t write the song



directly for the competition but it came in handy for me to try and get feedback.

(interview, March 6, 2014)

Diane, an active rapper in her city who had self-produced several CDs for friends and family, was not involved in her school's music program and was unaware of the composition competition. Somehow, the music teacher and her school principal obtained one of her CDs and, given the quality of her work, encouraged her to participate:

I never knew anything about it. I was in school one day and the principal called me down to the office. I thought I was in trouble. [*laughing*]. I'm like, "Oh, God, what did I do?" I got down to the office and they were listening to my CD. They were telling me, "This is really good and you should sign up for this competition."

I was kind of sketchy about it. I didn't want to do it at first because I didn't know who was involved. I just didn't know anything about it. It was all new to me.

(interview, March 5, 2014)

Diane entered "for the experience" and to see if her song would be accepted for performance, thereby validating that her song is worthy of being performed and recognizing that she is a competent composer:

It was like, "Sure, I guess I'll give it a shot." I chose one of the songs from the CD to put in for the competition. He gave me all the information and he signed me up. I did it for the experience and to see if my piece would go through. My teacher told me I should, so I was like, "I'm going to do it and I hope that positive results come back." I wanted to put one of my songs in to see if I could be recognized for my music. (interview, March 5, 2014)

May and Diane stated that they are inherently competitive in nature, believing that although they did not participate for competitive purposes, competition can benefit those who participate:

I like to compete in things. It's the adrenaline rush . . . a competition is really fun. Competition kind of sets you in your place. You know where you are with what you're doing and you want to try to get better. So, it kind of shows you like, "Okay, I got this this time and I'm going to try my best to work harder for the next time." I think it really helps. You could really be set back from a competition if you lose it, but I'm not really that person. If I lose, I'm going to try again. I'm going to keep trying until I get where I want to be. (May, interview, March 6, 2014)

I like competition, period. I'm a very competitive person. I just compete with anything. I feel like I can come on top with anything. I feel like I have a lot of self-esteem. You can give me something, like, "Let's draw this stick man," and I'll do everything I can to make sure my stick man comes out better than yours [*laughs*]. (Diane, interview, March 5, 2014)

**Exposure: Chris, Diane, and Alice.** Three students used the competition as a means for their music to gain more exposure to audiences (Chris and Diane) or be exposed to works by peers (Alice). For Chris, not only did he seek exposure of his works to a broad audience, but he also found competition to be a helpful influence for his compositions as it could motivate him to write a "better" song:

My orchestra teacher announced the competition in class. I knew about it from when our orchestra performed at the state music conference. The competition part

is always good, but I've never won that many things with my music. I do like the fact that my music can get exposed and played in more places, plus it helps establish me as a composer. Competition helps me compose. If I have a purpose for my music, it's better and more focused than me just writing whatever I think works. I think it helps improve the content of my music. I've found that, if I have a real meaning of a piece, I can write it a lot better and get it started a lot easier. I think with the composition contest, I figured, "I want to win this, it's got to be good," so I got to put a lot more effort into it. (interview, February 23, 2014)

In addition to having her music be validated by an objective third party, Diane also wanted to participate in the competition to have an opportunity to share her talent for composing and performing raps with a wider audience, thus expanding her exposure beyond her immediate urban area:

Certain rappers put out competitions where you send your music. It's just like this composition competition that we're talking about, but it's different, too. You can actually get signed to a label, which I don't want to do [laughing]. But I feel like I have a talent that not a lot of people recognize that I want to share with the world. I want people to appreciate it. It's not the competition and winning. It's more about other things. (interview, March 5, 2014)

Alice sought a different type of exposure. She wanted to be exposed to other students' compositions, listen to, and learn from them, as she had never heard students her age compose:

I showed a piece that I had on the backburner to my chorus teacher. He looked at it, told me about the competition, and encouraged me to register. I was pretty

interested in what other kids my age were doing because I had never met anyone else that had composed. I thought that it would be cool to hear other students, just like me, with their pieces. It wasn't about winning, but listening to what others like me write and getting ideas from them. (wiki response, March 18, 2014)

### **Influence of Composition Competition on Self-Concept as Musician**

All four students believe that acceptance to the composition competition validated their self-concepts as musicians in that their compositions were qualified to be accepted for performance. The acceptance, the performance of their works, and the reception that they received strengthened their self-concept as musicians, which encouraged them to continue composing.

For May, the opportunity to perform her work was a powerful experience. She felt affirmed by other participants and the audience, affecting her both as a musician and as a person:

I feel like a stronger musician and person, because that was the first time that I've actually performed something that I had written in front of a lot of people. It was like, "I can do this." I've always loved singing and seeing people get into what I'm singing . . . the audience is really getting into what I'm singing because I wrote these words. So, it was a really good feeling. It was cool. One of the other kids who won came up to me afterwards and said, "I really like your song." He was one of those kids who wrote for a large orchestra and it was just amazing . . . Him saying that felt really cool. It was cool that I actually had the chance to do this. (interview, March 6, 2014)

Diane felt affirmed as a musician by the reception that she received from the audience:

“Yeah. That made me feel really great inside, because I felt discouraged before the competition. But, I felt affirmed afterwards. I thought, ‘This is cool. I can compose music, and I want to do more of it’” (interview, March 5, 2014).

Chris views competitions as a means toward determining if he has improved as a composer, rather than as a way to compare himself against other composers: “I don’t stack myself up to other composers who haven’t won competitions. It’s more how I see myself. If I can win this, I’m a better composer than I was before” (wiki response, April 7, 2014).

Alice credits the competition with making her feel more successful as a musician and giving her an opportunity that is similar to what established composers experience:

Being a part of the competition was definitely positive. I think it made my composing seem like more of a reality . . . performing a composition for an event like that really makes you feel accomplished and successful. It’s really given me more of a dedication to music. (wiki response, April 4, 2014)

**Influences of Participation Besides Self-Concept as Musician** Students cited additional influences of the composition competition. A theme that emerged for May and Diane was heightened self-awareness of their characters. Alice believed that the competition acted as a motivating factor to finish a work that had previously been languishing. Chris felt that he learned more about the wide variety of musical works and cultures from around the United States and the world by attending the competition.

**Character: May and Diane.** The competition may have helped May and Diane learn more about their characters. May felt more empowered as an individual following the competition:

I learned that I am a strong person, just because of what I wrote for the competition. I noticed during and after the competition that I didn't just write this about any person. I wrote it about myself. It is that you can get through things and I feel like, just from that song, I feel stronger because that one song is about empowerment. That song is important to me. (interview, March 6, 2014)

Diane articulated a quality that may have always been inside of her, imploring others to stay strong in the face of adversity:

I learned that I am very brave. *[laughs]* I already knew that, but it was kind of an eye opener. I learned a lot. I really just want to say to whoever may listen to this, if you are a composer, just keep a positive mind about everything. Don't ever let anybody discourage you. And, no matter what people tell you, nobody really knows you like you, so if there's something that you want to do, and you feel like you can do it, then that's what you should do. Don't let people hold you down. (interview, March 5, 2014)

Diane also felt that she learned to become comfortable with an audience that is different from the one that she is used to in her city. She found that being comfortable helped her connect to this audience, helping to create a positive and affirming experience:

I learned that when you compose, as a composer, as a lyricist, as a rapper, you have to be comfortable with the crowd of people. You can't really explain it. You have to learn to be fitting for different types of people. I'm coming from a lower-

class area to a high-class area and I was thinking that these people are not going to be able to relate to what I'm saying. I got there and what I got for a response was completely different. It was just the opposite. (interview, March 5, 2014)

**Motivation: Alice.** Alice believed that her desire to participate in the competition so she could hear other students' compositions motivated her to finish a composition by the entry deadline, something that she normally has difficulty doing: "Usually, I just finish half of a song and I have a really hard time getting back to it. Everything had to be perfect for this and I think that really helped me complete something, for once!" (interview, February 28, 2014).

**Expansion of knowledge: Chris.** Chris felt that he learned more about the different types of music of the United States and the world by being accepted to participate in the competition and listening to the accepted works: "I think the competition has made me a more well rounded person because you learn more about different types of music around the world and the country from listening to other songs" (interview, February 23, 2014).

### **Discussion**

These four students' reasons for participating in composition competitions closely mirror those discussed by Carter (2008) and Whitacre (2009). May and Diane received validation of the quality of their work and skills as composers through acceptance to the competition, echoing Carter's (2008) findings. Furthermore, the competition deadline provided Alice with motivation to finish a work and gave Chris the opportunity for his music to be exposed to potentially influential figures, further supporting Whitacre's (2009) arguments.

All four students believe that acceptance to and participation in the composition competition strengthened their self-concepts as musicians, thus serving as encouragement for them to continue composing, similar to what Whitacre (2009) discussed and what Carter (2008) found with his participants. The act of composing may continue to positively influence music self-concept (Bolton, 2008; Randles, 2010), which, in turn, may positively influence motivation (Austin, Renwick, & McPherson, 2006) and participation in similar challenging events (Burland & Davidson, 2002; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Song & Hattie, 1984), thus creating a cycle of continuous music self-concept strengthening. It should be noted, however, that this was the first composition competition for three of the four students (Chris had previously participated in two composition competitions). Austin (1988) believed that the interaction of self-concept and competition, which produced an improved self-concept, might have been a result of students reacting positively to the novelty of having experienced a music competition for the first time. These three composition students may have experienced a similar phenomenon.

A limitation of this study is the absence of students who were rejected from the composition competition. Although acceptance to the composition competition validated and strengthened these four students' self-concepts' as musicians, we do not know if rejection from this competition had a similar or different effect, as only those who were accepted to the competition volunteered to participate in the present study. Additionally, these four participants have backgrounds that suggest that they already had strong self-concepts as musicians (e.g., Chris's published works for string orchestra; Alice's aspiration to compose music for video games and study composition at a university;



Diane's extensive experiences as a rapper; May's ability to play multiple instruments). While students stated various reasons for entry into the competition, findings suggest that all four participants projected a competitive personality or participated in competitive activities. Diane and May explicitly stated that they have competitive personalities, and Diane's goal was to be the "best" female rapper. Alice had performed in piano competitions for a sizable part of her life. Chris spoke of "winning" and extolled how his compositions have benefitted from competitions. Although all spoke of being intrinsically motivated to compose and entered the competition for self-growth and other purposes that would benefit their craft of composing, their competitive experiences or characters may be unconsciously motivating them to submit themselves for adjudication. However, researchers have also suggested that creative people are intrinsically motivated (Hennessey & Amabile, 1988) and that enabling extrinsic motivation can support creativity based on the individual's interpretation of how the motivation may affect performance (Hennessey, 2003).

The composition competition also influenced students in ways other than music self-concept, perhaps most consequentially for May and Diane. These two students believed that the competition helped them learn more about the strength that each had inside them. This strengthening of self-concept in a non-musical way may be a positive influence on motivation (Austin, Renwick, & McPherson, 2006) and may influence them to participate in similarly challenging events (Burland & Davidson, 2002; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Song & Hattie, 1984).

### **Implications**

Currently, many competitions provide feedback through means such as adjudicator comments. Researchers (Amabile, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1987) have noted that positive feedback regarding competence and efficacy might support intrinsic motivation. For the present study, May sought professional composer feedback through her participation in the competition. Unfortunately, students were not given feedback for this composition competition. The only measure of quality for their respective composition was acceptance for participation. It would be ideal for all competitions to provide constructive feedback for all students as individuals may use the feedback to help students focus on individual growth and create goals to improve upon for the future (Amabile, 1996; Austin, 1990; Hickey, 2012; Reese, 2003; Stauffer, 2013; Webster, 2012). Furthermore, with feedback, those who were not accepted can understand exactly why their works were rejected and can know how to improve, rather than attributing the rejection to bad luck (an unstable external attribute) or low ability (Weiner, 1985), leading to “helpless” learners who interpret failure as uncontrollable or unavoidable (Marsh et al., 1984).

Music education organizations and educational institutions should create face-to-face and online experiences for student composers to meet each other and network, listen to each other’s works, and receive feedback on their compositions from each other, music educators, and composers. Music-COMP (Music Composition Online Mentoring Program – formerly known as the Vermont MIDI Project) is one example of such an initiative that, for over 10 years, has cultivated a community of music educators, pre-service educators, and professional composer-mentors who encourage and support music composition for K-12 students (MacLeod, 2013; Music-COMP, 2014). Music-COMP’s activities include mentor composers critiquing compositions in-progress, sponsoring in-

school residencies and summer institutes for educators themselves to compose, interactive learning network sessions, and live performances of student compositions by professional musicians (MacLeod, 2013; Music-COMP, 2014). These types of experiences could provide feedback and formative experiences to student composers during the critical period of adolescence.

Even though the four student participants were accepted into the composition competition, none of them received composition lessons. Furthermore, Chris was the only participant who received feedback from a school music teacher. Students may be interested in composing and may benefit from composition lessons in a school setting, as occurs in many other international locations. Oftentimes, however, the large traditional performance-based ensemble is the sole music education experience in US secondary schools (Abril & Gault, 2008; Kratus, 2007; Randles & Smith, 2012). Ensemble experiences and secondary music teachers influence collegiate music education students to be socialized as performers and prioritize performance over all other types of musicing in their school positions (Cox, 1997; L’Roy, 1983; Mark, 1998; Randles & Smith, 2012; Roberts, 1991). Furthermore, these US pre-service music educators feel less comfortable teaching composition to children (Randles & Smith, 2012). The coupling of lack of exposure to music composition in primary and secondary schools in the US (Hickey, 2012; Kaschub, 2013; Kennedy, 2002) and lack of music composition pedagogy courses in music teacher education programs (Kaschub, 2013; Reimer, 2003) creates a self-perpetuation cycle of avoidance of composition activities in the classroom (Hickey, 2012; Kaschub, 2013). The two school music teachers who were interviewed for this study, but

did not provide data that was particularly illuminating for the research questions, may have been influenced by similar phenomena.

Music teacher educators should make efforts to interweave composition experiences and composition pedagogy throughout music teacher education programs (Kaschub & Smith, 2013; Reese, 2003; Webster, 2009). Songwriting classes can be offered to secondary students and pre-service educators (Kratz, 2013). Additionally, professional music education associations should sponsor composition workshops and clinics for teachers at conferences. Similarly, these institutions and organizations might offer face-to-face and online forums for educators to learn about composition pedagogy from university composition professors and professional composers. Teachers may wish to compose music themselves to gain experience (Kaschub, 2013), as research has suggested a link between past experience with music and compositional thinking and teaching composition (Hewitt, 2002; Odena & Welch, 2007). Finally, print resources exist to assist educators with implementing songwriting (Kratz, 2016) and composition instruction in classrooms (Hickey, 2012; Kaschub & Smith, 2009).

May and Diane offered comments that suggest that their self-concepts as musicians were strengthened in part due to their compositions being performed at the competition. A non-adjudicated composition festival that allows all submissions to be performed may have the same result without the adverse influences on self-concept that may come with rejection. The other influences of an adjudicated competition, such as self-validation of one's composition skills, may not be as pronounced in a non-adjudicated setting, but the experience of performing for an audience may impact a higher number of students. A replication of this study that includes students who were rejected from participation in the

present composition competition (a perspective that could not be explored in the present study) may provide useful data in further examining the phenomena of the possible influences of competitions on composition students' self-concepts as musicians.

Researchers have suggested that competitive evaluation structures may cause students' self-concepts to "shift" enough that they discontinue participation in musical activities that were initially perceived as being egalitarian (Hoffman, 2012; Robinson, 2008).

Future research on students who are rejected from composition competitions could explore whether rejection encourages students to discontinue composition. Also, a modification of this study that is longitudinal in nature and includes students who have participated in multiple composition competitions may provide additional perspectives on the possible influences of competitions on students' self-concepts as musicians over a longer period of time.

It may be of particular interest to replicate the present study with collegiate composition faculty and professional composers. Members of these populations may have participated in multiple composition competitions, have more life experience than K-12 students, and are in different places in their development and careers as composers. A similar study could determine how competitions have affected their self-concepts as musicians during their different stages of development.

### **Conclusion**

Competitions in music education most likely will continue to generate discussion, as the profession remains philosophically divided on the value of competition (Rohrer, 2002).

When considering whether to encourage student participation in any type of competition, a music educator must determine if the outcome will result in a meaningful educational

experience, regardless of the quality of performance or composition. As composition competitions may be the only form of feedback and validation young composers receive, music education organizations might consider providing composition competition experiences that are educative and inspiring in the hopes of strengthening young composers' self-concepts as musicians. They, in turn, may motivate them to compose and provide new music for future generations of performers and audiences.

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